



Child care instability from 6 to 36 months and the social adjustment of children in prekindergarten

Mary E. Bratsch-Hines^{a,*}, Irina Mokrova^{a,1}, Lynne Vernon-Feagans^{b,2}, The Family Life Project Key Investigators³

^a Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, United States

^b School of Education, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, United States

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ABSTRACT

Most children in the United States experience nonparental child care during early childhood, and many children experience changes in their care during this period. Changes in care, or *child care instability*, have been argued to disrupt children's emerging relationships with others and may impede children's social-emotional development, particularly when changes occur during infancy and toddlerhood. Data for this study were drawn from the Family Life Project, a longitudinal study representative of families living in rural low-wealth areas. With a sample of 1292 children who were followed from six months to prekindergarten, this study examined the associations between cumulative child provider instability (measured as overall changes or changes across or within settings) from 6 to 36 months and children's social adjustment at prekindergarten. A number of factors were included to control for family selection into child care. Results suggested that more overall child care provider instability was negatively associated with teacher ratings of social adjustment at prekindergarten. This association was driven by provider instability *across* but not *within* settings, though effect sizes were small. These findings point to an increased need to understand how early child care instability may be related to children's subsequent development.

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Introduction

Nonparental child care for young children has expanded dramatically over the last 40 years, becoming an increasingly

* Corresponding author at: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 517 South Greensboro Street, 108 Sheryl-Mar North Building, Carrboro, NC 27510, United States. Tel.: +1 919 962 7322.

E-mail addresses: bratsch@email.unc.edu (M.E. Bratsch-Hines), irina.mokrova@unc.edu (I. Mokrova), lynnevf@email.unc.edu (L. Vernon-Feagans).

¹ Address: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 517 South Greensboro Street, 110 Sheryl-Mar North Building, Carrboro, NC 27510, United States.

² Address: The William C. Friday Distinguished Professor, 301K Peabody Hall #3500, The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599, United States.

³ The Family Life Project (FLP) Key Investigators include Lynne Vernon Feagans, The University of North Carolina; Martha Cox, The University of North Carolina; Clancy Blair, The Pennsylvania State University; Peg Burchinal, The University of North Carolina; Linda Burton, Duke University; Keith Crnic, The Arizona State University; Ann Crouter, The Pennsylvania State University; Patricia Garrett-Peters, The University of North Carolina; Mark Greenberg, The Pennsylvania State University; Stephanie Lanza, The Pennsylvania State University; Roger Mills-Koonce, The University of North Carolina; Emily Werner, The Pennsylvania State University and Michael Willoughby, The University of North Carolina.

normative experience for children in the United States. Three primary aspects of nonparental child care that have been associated with children's social-emotional development are quality of care (Mashburn et al., 2008; Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, & Vandergrift, 2010), quantity of care (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network (NICHD ECCRN), 1998, 2006), and type of care (Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004). A growing body of work has examined a fourth aspect of child care, child care instability, which has the potential for positive or negative impacts on children's early social development. On the one hand, changes in child care can be considered normative and beneficial if caregivers prefer home-based or relative care during infancy and toddlerhood but switch to center-based care during preschool years (Morrissey, 2010). On the other hand, changes in child care may be disruptive for children if they are involuntary or abrupt (Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013).

The concept of *child care instability* (also termed *child care stability* or *child care changes*) has been proposed to be an important issue in understanding children's social development (Adams & Rohacek, 2010). Empirical research has defined and measured the construct in a number of ways and has often studied non-representative samples, thus limiting generalizability across

studies and for larger populations of children. Child care instability has been operationalized as sequential changes in child care provider between child care settings (stops or starts in provider; Tran & Weinbraub, 2006; Tran & Winsler, 2011); changes in care arrangement, such as type or location (Miller, 2005); changes that occur within a child care setting, including teacher turnover and room-to-room movement (Bradley, 2010); or concurrent rather than sequential changes among providers, such as the use of multiple arrangements (Morrissey, 2009; Tran & Weinbraub, 2006). Perhaps due in part to these measurement variations, researchers have uncovered mixed findings between child care instability and child outcomes, with some studies showing negative associations between child care instability and child outcomes, including school readiness skills, social development, externalizing behaviors, and adult-child attachment (Ansari & Winsler, 2013; Bratsch-Hines, Vernon-Feagans, & The Family Life Project Investigators, 2013; Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Love et al., 2003; Pilarz & Hill, 2014; Tran & Winsler, 2011). Other studies have shown contradictory or nonexistent associations between child care instability and child outcomes (NICHD ECCRN, 1998, 2003; Tran & Weinbraub, 2006).

In the current study, we sought to contribute to the existing literature on child care instability by measuring instability in a more comprehensive way and by focusing on the relationship between child care instability measured during infancy and toddlerhood and children's social adjustment at prekindergarten (pre-K). Our participants constituted a representative sample of children living in rural low-wealth communities. We defined child care instability as cumulative changes in child care providers within and/or across child care settings from 6 to 36 months of age. Because children in our sample regularly moved in and out of nonparental care, we also included changes between parental care and nonparental care settings rather than limiting the instability variables to changes in nonparental caregivers and settings. Finally, we controlled for a wide range of child, family, and child care characteristics to address the potential selection effects confounding these factors and child care instability.

Perspectives on child care instability

To understand the possible implications of child care instability, previous researchers have generally used theoretical perspectives focusing on the importance of predictable caregivers in young children's lives. From the viewpoint of attachment theory, for example, the stable and secure relationships that young children form with parents and other caregivers serve as a working model for social connections that children will form in the future (Bowlby, 1973; Howes & Hamilton, 1993). Higher levels of instability and disruption in attachment relationships during children's early years may lead to subsequent difficulties in creating trusting relationships with peers and other adults, thus hindering children's social-emotional development. From the position of bioecological theory, child development in all areas of functioning takes place through continuous proximal processes between the developing child and other objects or persons in the child's immediate environment. Depending on the nature of these proximal processes, interactions between the child and his/her child care providers may be associated with potentially negative or positive outcomes in children's social development. The theory suggests, however, that proximal processes should be long enough, frequent enough, and increasingly complex in order for positive development to occur (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). A high level of child care instability is likely to preclude proximal processes from having sufficient duration or complexity to facilitate the optimal development of children's social skills.

Nonetheless, changes in child care can arguably be positive for children. A change in child care that occurs at a later age

(i.e., 3–5 years) is often normative (Huston, Chang, & Gennetian, 2002), as parents move children from informal to formal child care settings, which may improve children's social and academic outcomes by providing a stronger foundation for the transition to school. Three- and four-year-old children who changed from family-based to center-based care were reported by their teachers to have higher social skills (Ansari & Winsler, 2013). Other changes may occur that help promote older children's success in school. Children who changed teachers in the year prior to kindergarten showed decreases in teacher-reported behavior problems, suggesting that the pre-K programs may have transitioned children to new providers in order to create a better provider-child match (Tran & Winsler, 2011).

Yet, what happens when children experience child care instability as infants and toddlers rather than as preschoolers? As compared to preschool-aged children who are more autonomous, infants and toddlers are less mobile and more dependent on caregivers (Howes & Hamilton, 1993). Important milestones in the development of social skills prior to age three include early sharing behaviors, increasing ability to cooperate, and responsiveness to others' distress (Hay & Cook, 2007). Too many changes in caregivers during infancy and toddlerhood may preclude optimal development of these positive characteristics and alter the way children develop relationships with others in the future (Cummings, 1980; Rubenstein & Howes, 1979). According to bioecological theory, the positive early proximal processes required to form strong child-caregiver attachment relationships can be expected to produce positive later proximal processes, such as the ability for children to elicit positive interactions from peers and adults in preschool (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Only a limited number of studies have tested whether child care instability experienced at early ages was associated with later outcomes. Howes and Hamilton (1993) found that children who changed providers, but not settings, as toddlers (18–24 months) were more aggressive at four years of age. However, in the larger NICHD ECCRN study (2003), more changes in child care arrangements between 6 and 36 months was unrelated to pre-K teacher-reported social competence. In the current study, we tested whether child care instability for infants and toddlers in a representative sample of under-resourced families was related to children's social adjustment measured at pre-K.

Rural poverty and changing between parental and nonparental care

Income, employment, and other family characteristics are associated with child care instability (Han, 2004). Families living in rural locations in the United States commonly experience irregular employment (such as shift work, part-time, or seasonal work), and parents may have to work several jobs in order to meet the needs of their family (O'Hare, 2009). Consequently, families may have to make changes in their child care arrangements in order to match their employment insecurity (Usdansky & Wolf, 2008; Vernon-Feagans, Garrett-Peters, De Marco, & Bratsch-Hines, 2012). Due to economic restructuring and higher poverty rates in the rural United States, families frequently face the need to move often (Ziol-Guest & McKenna, 2009). Overall, low-income families find it more difficult than middle-income families to access child care and maintain consistent child care arrangements (Chaudry, 2004; London, Scott, Edin, & Hunter, 2004).

Moreover, due to instability in employment and income, children frequently "drift" between parental and nonparental care. That is, children are placed in nonparental child care when parents find temporary jobs and then are cared for at home when parents lose those jobs (Lowe, Weisner, Geis, & Huston, 2005; Scott & Abelson, 2013). Prior empirical studies on child care instability have often used samples of children who were consistently in child

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